

Change management in higher education: unveiling employee responses at a regional state university in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions and lived experiences of employees at Romblon State University (RSU) in response to organizational change and the influence of academic leadership. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was applied involving 12 purposively selected employees from different campuses and academic ranks. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Thematic analysis produced five themes: perceptions of change as a strategic necessity, areas identified for improvement, reactions to the rationalization plan, employee adaptation, and leadership's central role in facilitating change. Findings point to both opportunities and challenges within institutional transformation, emphasizing the importance of effective communication, leadership engagement, and employee participation. Based on these results, the study proposes the framework consisting of resource optimization, adaptation, vision, enhancements, and the role of leadership to guide change processes (RAVER). The framework provides practical guidance for higher education leaders aiming to build a responsive and resilient organizational culture. This study contributes theoretical and practical insights by showing how phenomenological inquiry can enrich models of change management in Philippine higher education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding how employees respond to organizational change is essential for improving institutional performance and leadership effectiveness in higher education. Romblon State University (RSU), a regional institution committed to academic excellence and public service, has implemented transformative initiatives to align with global standards. These include International Organization for Standardization (ISO) certification, academic program rationalization, infrastructure upgrades, and technological innovations. These reforms aim to enhance service quality and global competitiveness, consistent with sustainable development goal (SDG) 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education for all [1]. However, despite these structural and policy changes, the perspectives and lived experiences of employees, who play a critical role in determining the success or failure of reforms, remain underexplored in scholarly literature [2].

Change management in educational institutions requires more than policy alignment. It demands active employee engagement, responsive leadership, and clear communication strategies. Studies showed that many organizational change efforts fail due to employee resistance, lack of motivation, and ineffective

leadership communication [3], [4]. Conversely, research highlights that empowerment, participatory planning, and visionary leadership contribute to successful implementation [5], [6]. These findings underscore the need to understand how employees perceive the rationale, pace, and direction of institutional change, particularly in regional universities where resource constraints, geographic isolation, and structural limitations intensify the challenges of reform adoption [7].

At RSU, change initiatives have ranged from curriculum revisions and digital transformation to resource reallocation and administrative restructuring. While some reforms were embraced, others met with apprehension or skepticism. Employee feedback emphasizes fairness in processes, transparent communication, and inclusive decision-making as key to gaining acceptance. Literature suggests that when stakeholders feel unsupported or excluded, the sustainability of change efforts is jeopardized [8]. Despite extensive corporate change management research, limited empirical evidence exists from provincial public university contexts in the Philippines. This study addresses that gap through the resource optimization and rationalization, adaptation and employee involvement, vision and communication, enhancements in technology and academics, role of leadership in change management (RAVER), change management framework, which captures employee responses and leadership dynamics specific to RSU. This framework offers a contextually grounded contribution to educational leadership and change theory.

The complexity of employee responses at RSU can be analyzed through themes such as workload perception, adaptation strategies, and leadership style. Research affirms that successful change is more likely when leadership capacity, employee involvement, and structured resistance management are prioritized [9], [10]. This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine employee experiences and reflections, identifying patterns of adaptation, resistance, and the role of academic leaders in shaping these responses.

The research links directly to SDG 4 and SDG 16. SDG 4 supports quality education by ensuring institutional strategies align with equitable learning environments, while SDG 16 promotes participatory governance, transparency, and institutional trust. By situating change management within these goals, the study provides practical recommendations for fostering an inclusive and adaptive academic culture.

The general objective is to explore employee responses to change management initiatives at RSU, focusing on lived experiences, perceptions of academic leadership, and adaptation strategies. Specifically, the study seeks to: i) describe employee perceptions and experiences regarding organizational change; ii) identify enabling factors and barriers to engagement in institutional reforms; iii) examine the influence of leadership communication, vision, and support on adaptability; and iv) develop a localized framework that captures the interaction between leadership and employee perspectives in shaping institutional readiness for change.

Figure 1 illustrates the schematic diagram of the study, anchored on Lewin's change theory and transformational leadership theory. Lewin's model, which consists of the unfreezing, changing, and refreezing stages, offers a process-oriented perspective for assessing readiness, transition, and stabilization [11]. Transformational leadership theory complements this by emphasizing the role of leaders in articulating vision, fostering commitment, and guiding employees through complex transitions [12], [13]. Together, these theories provide the structural and relational foundation for examining change in RSU's context.

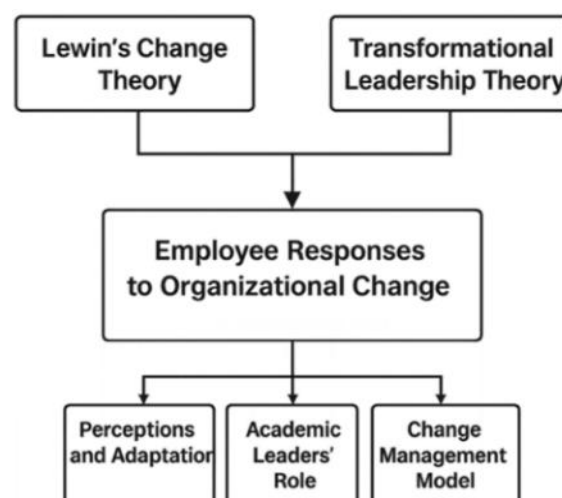


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of the study

The central focus of the diagram is employee responses to organizational change, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions that shape engagement or resistance. These responses are influenced by perceptions of leadership, communication flow, and institutional culture. The three analytical areas emerge: perceptions and adaptation, the role of academic leaders, and the development of a change management model. Each area contributes to understanding how employees process institutional directives and how their feedback can refine policy and practice.

The schematic model shows how integrating leadership practices with employee experiences creates a responsive and practical framework for managing change in public higher education institutions. It emphasizes that employee participation, trust in leadership, and alignment with institutional vision are essential for sustainable transformation. As a qualitative inquiry, the study will validate this framework through thematic analysis of interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), ultimately offering RSU and similar universities a grounded and adaptable guide for inclusive and participatory change implementation.

2. THE THEORETICAL AND LITERATURE BASIS OF THE STUDY

2.1. Theoretical foundations

Organizational change is driven by both internal and external pressures that necessitate a dynamic response to survive and thrive in competitive environments. Lewin's change theory provides a 3-stage model (unfreezing, changing, and refreezing) that guides institutions in preparing for change, implementing new strategies, and stabilizing the organization afterward. This theoretical lens underscores the importance of preparing the institution and its employees before initiating transformation. The transformational leadership theory complements this model by emphasizing the vital role of visionary leaders in inspiring, motivating, and guiding employees through uncertainty. Leaders who embody idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration are more capable of leading successful organizational change. Together, these theories offer a strong foundation for examining change management at RSU, where both structural planning and human agency are key to reform adoption.

2.2. Review of literature on organizational change

Organizational change has become an essential response to evolving global challenges and operational inefficiencies. The survival and success of organizations depend on their ability to adapt to change, whether planned or unplanned [6]. Educational institutions are not exempt from this demand, especially as they face challenges such as curriculum relevancy, faculty preparedness, and infrastructure adequacy. Kemp and Low [7] argue that universities must embrace change to remain competitive in the global education market. These demands necessitate proactive leadership that can navigate uncertainty, develop strategic plans, and cultivate an environment conducive to innovation and adaptation.

2.3. Change resistance and its theoretical roots

Resistance to change is a common phenomenon in organizations and is often rooted in conflicting goals and interests between institutions and employees. The goal theory suggests that resistance emerges when the personal goals of employees are misaligned with institutional objectives, leading to friction and disengagement. Similarly, principal-agent theory explains that organizational efforts to maximize profit or efficiency may conflict with employee aspirations for job security and fair compensation. Previous studies [2], [8] highlight that unaddressed resistance can derail even the most well-intentioned change initiatives. Therefore, understanding the psychological and organizational origins of resistance is crucial in designing inclusive and sustainable change models.

2.4. Leadership roles in managing change

Leaders serve as catalysts for organizational change, and their engagement is essential for successful transformation. Balogun and Johnson [9] note that upper and middle managers must not only manage processes but also interpret and convey change objectives to their teams. According to Wooldridge *et al.* [10], middle managers' perception of fairness and inclusion influences their commitment to change. Several studies [11], [12] reveal that when leaders involve employees and maintain transparent communication, it fosters ownership and reduces cynicism. Conversely, a lack of engagement and poor communication can lead to distrust and organizational inertia [13], [14]. Thus, leaders must be equipped with the emotional intelligence and strategic acumen to facilitate inclusive and participatory change.

2.5. Empirical studies on change management

Several contemporary studies further validate the relevance of effective change management practices. Mabasa and Flotman [3] emphasize the need for cognitive and emotional preparedness in change implementation, stressing transparency and empowerment as drivers of success. In addition, Karasvirta and

Teerikangas [15] introduce the concept of ‘change organizations’ and propose a typology that includes networks, teams, and individual roles that facilitate institutional reform. Furthermore, Musaigwa [16] underscores the significance of leadership actions such as planning, motivating, and communicating, while Granberg *et al.* [17] emphasize that leadership styles and contextual understanding influence the effectiveness of change adoption in healthcare. Lastly, Khaw *et al.* [5] categorize employee reactions into micro and macro responses, advocating for a comprehensive understanding of behavioral patterns during organizational change. These findings reinforce the study’s goal of evaluating employee responses and leadership’s role in RSU’s institutional reforms.

3. METHOD

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research design to explore how employees of RSU respond to institutional change initiatives. The phenomenological approach was chosen to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings that employees attribute to organizational transformations. According to Creswell [18], phenomenology “focuses on describing the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon,” aiming “to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence.” He further notes that researchers using this approach “explore what participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon.” Consistent with this perspective, the study sought to uncover the shared understanding of employees as they navigate institutional change within the university context.

3.1. Research design

The study utilized interpretive phenomenology, which seeks to understand and interpret the essence of participants’ experiences [19]. This approach is appropriate for analyzing employee perceptions of change management within the dynamic and evolving environment of a higher education institution. It provides insight into how individuals make sense of the organizational reforms implemented at RSU.

3.2. Participants and sampling technique

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had direct experience with institutional changes at RSU. This included academic and administrative employees across different campuses, ranks, and service years to ensure diversity in perspectives. The inclusion criteria required that participants had been employed at RSU for at least 3 years and had witnessed or participated in major change efforts during that time. The number of participants was determined by data saturation, consistent with Morse [20] recommendation that qualitative adequacy is reached when no new themes emerge.

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and FGDs. An interview guide was developed to cover core areas such as perceptions of change, leadership influence, and enabling or limiting factors in the change process. The questions were pilot-tested to ensure clarity and alignment with the study objectives. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants’ consent. FGDs were also conducted to allow for deeper interaction and collective reflection. All data collection was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis following the Braun and Clarke framework [21] was used to examine interview transcripts. The process included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software facilitated data management and coding. Themes were derived inductively to reflect the authenticity of employee narratives, and significant statements were extracted to support each theme.

3.5. Trustworthiness of the study

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [22]. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants were invited to validate the interpretations of their statements. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the context and participant experiences. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through audit trails and peer debriefing.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 illustrates the diversity of the 12 faculty members from RSU who participated in this phenomenological inquiry. Variation is evident in gender, years of service, academic rank, and campus location. Most participants were male (10 of 12), a trend that may shape perceptions of and approaches to institutional change. Granberg *et al.* [17] observe that gendered leadership norms can influence reform implementation, while Rebeka and Indradevi [6] suggest that greater gender diversity often fosters more inclusive decision-making.

Table 1. Demographic profile of study participants

Participant	Gender	Years of service in RSU	Academic rank	Campus
P1	Male	30	Assistant professor IV	Kabolutan
P2	Male	8	Assistant professor II	Kabolutan
P3	Male	14	Associate professor V	Kabolutan
P4	Female	8	Instructor III	Calatrava
P5	Male	7	Assistant professor III	Main Campus
P6	Male	10	Assistant professor V	Main Campus
P7	Female	25	Associate professor V	Main Campus
P8	Male	8	Associate professor II	Extramural
P9	Male	15	Professor I	Extramural
P10	Male	30	Professor V	San Andres
P11	Male	18	Assistant professor IV	San Fernando
P12	Male	22	Instructor III	San Andres

Years of service ranged from 7 to 30, indicating differing levels of exposure to organizational change. Khaw *et al.* [5] note that long-serving faculty bring valuable institutional memory and mentoring capacity, although extended tenure can also lead to reform fatigue when personal goals diverge from institutional priorities, as suggested by goal theory. Conversely, Balogun and Johnson [9] contend that experienced faculty, when constructively engaged, can serve as effective bridges between strategic direction and operational execution.

Academic ranks spanned from instructor III to professor V, providing insights from multiple governance levels. This diversity supports Lewin's change theory, which holds that readiness for change is enhanced when representatives from various hierarchical levels participate in the unfreezing stage. However, Wooldridge *et al.* [10] caution that diversity in rank does not automatically translate into meaningful participation if involvement is merely symbolic.

Participants represented six geographically dispersed campuses, reflecting varied local cultures, resource availability, and administrative proximity. Musaigwa [16] underscores that multi-campus systems require leadership approaches tailored to local contexts. Such heterogeneity, as Ravitch and Carl [23] affirm, strengthens the credibility of qualitative findings by capturing a broad range of perspectives.

Table 2 synthesizes participant perspectives on the nature and pace of change management in RSU. Participants generally viewed change as a routine occurrence, particularly during administrative transitions, and often aligned with strategic plans. This perspective aligns with Edmonds [24], who asserts that sustainable change is embedded within organizational culture. Mabasa and Flotman [3] similarly emphasize that transparency and empowerment are crucial in securing commitment to reforms.

However, the ISO implementation process was perceived as both beneficial for compliance and excessively rapid, creating bureaucratic challenges. This reflects Kovoov-Misra [25] argument that abrupt change, even when necessary, can produce confusion and resistance if not paced with employee readiness. Transformational leadership theory underscores the importance of balancing intellectual stimulation with realistic timelines to maintain staff engagement.

The expressed need for clearer communication about change rationale supports the finding of Hakro and Mathew [26] that leaders who articulate the strategic purpose of reforms build greater trust and cooperation. Conversely, Essel *et al.* [27] caution that communication alone, without matching resource support, may be insufficient to sustain morale. The varying perceptions within this theme highlight Lewin's assertion that the moving stage of change requires both strategic clarity and adaptive leadership.

Table 3 presents the thematic analysis of enabling factors and barriers that influence faculty engagement in institutional reforms at RSU. The findings indicate that leadership support, a shared institutional vision, and proactive individual engagement serve as primary enablers of reform. Respondents consistently associated motivation and productivity with strong leadership, particularly in recognizing faculty efforts and facilitating opportunities for professional growth. A comparison with Mabasa and Flotman [3] shows a similar emphasis on transparency and empowerment as drivers of successful change.

Table 2. Thematic analysis on views on change management

Theme	Sub-theme	Direct transcripts
Views on change management	Change as routine and part of strategic plan	"It's really common, Sir, that when the manager changes, the system also changes." (P1) "We also need these changes so you can see that the adjustments are part of the management's strategic plan." (P1)
	Alignment of change with organizational goals	"That's why change management should be aligned with the target scenario or goal within a given period. It must be aligned, because if not, it's merely a change in management, not real change." (P3)
	Radical and fast-paced ISO implementation	"For me, the changes brought upon by the administration is rather radical and somewhat fast-paced, but I will not argue that the changes themselves are not needed." (P6)
	Concerns on workload and bureaucracy due to ISO	"Unlike now, they require us to strictly follow the process... it has become complicated, even though it could actually be done in a shorter period of time." (P2)
	Compliance with international standards	"Since we have adopted ISO, everything we do must comply with ISO standards." (P1) "Because of ISO were committed to pursue excellence." (P10) "However, the outcome of ISO is good because the processes have become clearer and easier to follow." (P12)
Areas needing change	Need for clear communication of change rationale	"They should explain their plans to their subordinates... explain them thoroughly so they can understand." (P8)
	Technological advancement, academic programs, student support services, curriculum revision	"RSU may need to consider changes in response to evolving educational trends... enhancing academic programs... improving support services... aligning curricula..." (P8)

Table 3. Thematic analysis matrix on enabling factors and barriers that affect their engagement in institutional reforms

Theme	Sub-theme	Sample statements
Enabling factors	Leadership support	"The President motivates employees by promoting internally and encouraging higher education opportunities." (P4) "Our leaders recognize our efforts and reward our contributions." (P6)
	Shared vision and communication	"Leaders must clearly communicate the vision and involve everyone in decision-making." (P8) "We feel empowered when we are informed and heard." (P9)
	Personal initiatives and ownership	"Instead of waiting, we initiated efforts to solve issues in our campuses." (P9) "Faculty took steps to improve student services even before management intervened." (P5)
Barriers	Inadequate resources and infrastructure	"We lacked water, electricity, and internet access at the new campus." (P9) "These basic issues affect our ability to focus on reform." (P7)
	Resistance to change	"Some colleagues still prefer the old ways and resist new systems." (P2) "There is discomfort in leaving our comfort zones." (P8)
	Limited stakeholder engagement	"Decisions are made without consulting those affected." (P6) "We are not always involved early in the reform process." (P3)

These results are supported by Brinkmann and Kvale [28], who emphasize the role of contextually grounded leadership communication in fostering positive attitudes toward institutional change. The emphasis on a shared vision and inclusive communication also aligns with the findings of Yousaf *et al.* [29] who state that perceived readiness for change increases when leaders clearly articulate goals and actively involve stakeholders throughout the reform process. Participant responses confirm that when faculty members feel heard and supported, they are more likely to exhibit commitment and initiative in the implementation of institutional reforms. A comparison with Mabasa and Flotman [3] further reinforces the idea that transparency and empowerment are essential to cultivating sustained faculty engagement.

The analysis also identifies several barriers to effective engagement, including inadequate infrastructure, resistance to change, and limited stakeholder consultation. Statements related to poor internet access and deficiencies in basic facilities reflect the infrastructure limitations noted by Essel *et al.* [27], particularly in rural campuses facing technological constraints. Resistance to change, rooted in discomfort and habitual practices, is well documented in the work of Brinkmann and Kvale [28], who highlight the psychological inertia that can slow or undermine institutional transitions. Furthermore, limited consultation in reform decisions undermines faculty morale, as supported by Vlachopoulos and Makri [30], [31], who demonstrate that participatory decision-making significantly enhances institutional collaboration and trust, particularly in hybrid or geographically dispersed educational settings.

The implications are RSU must strengthen its internal reform structures by ensuring equitable access to resources, expanding stakeholder involvement in decision-making, and investing in leadership capacity-building. Doing so will not only foster a culture of innovation but also mitigate passive resistance and enable more faculty to assume active roles in change processes. As institutions continue to face rapid transformations

in the higher education landscape, collaborative engagement and infrastructure investment will be essential to sustaining reform momentum and maintaining organizational readiness for future challenges.

Table 4 illustrates that effective leadership communication plays a crucial role in shaping employee adaptability and participation in institutional reforms at RSU. Participants highlighted the necessity of transparency and clarity in communication to minimize confusion and reduce resistance. When communication lacks specificity or consistency, it creates uncertainty and disengagement among employees.

Table 4. Thematic analysis matrix on leadership communication, vision, and support

Theme	Sub-theme	Supporting transcript/illustration
Leadership communication	Transparency and clarity	<i>"For me, communication is the most essential skill a leader must have to achieve the change efforts in RSU."</i> (P6) <i>"Unclear communication about the reasons for change and its potential benefits can exacerbate resistance and lead to confusion among stakeholders."</i> (P7)
	Feedback and listening	<i>"Improve first the human workforce by sending and hiring young faculty to teach here in Romblon."</i> (P5) <i>"Management also needs to listen; imagine being hurt because you were transferred—you're going home to a place that isn't even your own."</i> (P1)
Leadership vision	Strategic direction	<i>"Foresight thinking, otherwise status quo. The leader must also be visionary."</i> (P3) <i>"The vision must be clear, and there should be a strong will to execute that vision."</i> (P8)
Leadership support	Inspirational leadership	<i>"The present leadership has a wonderful amazing dream in changing everything."</i> (P5) <i>"The present leadership style is participative and inclusive."</i> (P9)
	Recognition and motivation	<i>"I can see that in him, Sir. That's why, if you don't get promoted through the NBC process, you still have a chance through internal promotion."</i> (P4) <i>"President's role is to assess the effects of changes and consult everyone affected."</i> (P9)
	Empowerment and participation	<i>"The essence of effective leadership, Sir, is that major decisions are not made by me alone but by all of us together."</i> (P9) <i>"It's good to have different ideas, but we will follow whatever is best for us and what the majority agrees upon."</i> (P9)

These findings correspond with the work of Grogan [32], who underscores the value of consistent and transparent leadership communication in educational contexts. Furthermore, the capacity of leaders to actively listen to employee concerns and integrate feedback fosters an atmosphere of trust and collaboration. This observation aligns with Hoy and Miskel [33], who emphasize that effective communication strategies are essential in promoting mutual understanding and a shared sense of responsibility during organizational change. A comparison with Mabasa and Flotman [3] shows a similar emphasis on transparency and empowerment as drivers of successful change.

The study also highlights the impact of leadership vision on shaping faculty engagement. Participants appreciated leaders who demonstrated strategic foresight, articulated a clear direction, and inspired others through inclusive and participative leadership. They perceived such qualities as essential for creating a unified institutional direction. These perspectives resonate with He and Oxendine [34], who argue that a well-communicated and aspirational vision enhances faculty ownership of reforms. Moreover, the data suggest that recognition, motivation, and participatory leadership foster empowerment, which in turn increases willingness to adapt to institutional change. Grogan [32], supports this by stating that visionary leadership can inspire individuals and strengthen institutional identity and commitment. A comparison with Mabasa and Flotman [3] reinforces the view that transparency and empowerment are central to sustaining effective change.

The implication of these findings is that leadership at RSU must continuously prioritize strategic communication, shared vision, and participatory leadership practices. Strengthening these areas can deepen employee engagement, minimize resistance to change, and align institutional goals with individual contributions. As reforms in higher education demand adaptability and collaboration, the university's leadership should cultivate environments where communication, vision, and support are not only management tools but also strategic imperatives for successful transformation. A comparison with Mabasa and Flotman [3] confirms the importance of these elements in driving positive organizational outcomes.

Findings in Table 5 emphasize the dynamic relationship between leadership actions and employee perceptions in influencing institutional readiness for change. Participants noted that these elements align personal aspirations with institutional goals, with clear communication and inclusive decision-making fostering stronger commitment to reform. Jensen [35] emphasizes that inclusive governance promotes both value creation and sustainability, while respondents described participative leadership as a driver of trust, engagement, and institutional resilience during transitions.

Mutual trust, empowerment, and capacity building emerged as particularly critical. Empowering employees to propose solutions and take initiative cultivates ownership and accountability, strengthening the

institution's adaptability. Research by Taylor *et al.* [36] affirm that effective leadership coaching promotes self-determined and sustained change, while Kemp and Low [37] highlight that preparing human resources through training and mentorship should precede major structural reforms.

However, Georgalis *et al.* [2] caution that while extensive participatory processes support inclusivity, they can slow decision-making in urgent reform contexts. Ma and Tang [38] further refine this perspective by demonstrating that inclusive leadership follows a curvilinear relationship with outcomes. Moderate inclusivity optimizes team innovation, but excessive inclusivity may dilute accountability, slow decisions, and reduce reform effectiveness. This suggests that while RSU should continue fostering collaborative processes, leadership must also establish clear authority structures to prevent reform stagnation. The implication for RSU is that readiness will be optimized when leadership balances inclusivity with decisiveness, ensuring collaborative processes do not compromise reform timeliness. Building a culture grounded in transparency, empowerment, and shared purpose can reduce resistance and enhance organizational coherence, while a localized framework that reflects both leadership intent and employee insight can guide sustainable and adaptive transformation strategies.

Table 5. Thematic analysis matrix on leadership and employee perspectives shaping institutional readiness for change

Theme	Description	Supporting participant quotes
Collaborative vision building	Leadership and employees both recognize the need for a shared vision to foster unity and direction during organizational transitions. This collaborative approach enhances institutional readiness by aligning personal values with institutional goals.	<i>"The vision must be disseminated clearly. Even those who initially oppose will understand once they see the bigger picture."</i> (P8)
Participatory leadership	A leadership style that invites input and consensus from employees strengthens organizational trust and encourages active involvement in reforms.	<i>"Everyone should voice their suggestions, and the majority decision must be respected. That's what participative leadership means."</i> (P9)
Mutual trust and empowerment	Trust in leadership and the empowerment of employees to lead initiatives at the ground level create a culture of accountability and ownership essential for readiness.	<i>"Before moving, needs must be anticipated. Leaders must assess and equip, and employees should propose practical solutions."</i> (P5)
Communication and transparency	Open lines of communication ensure that both leaders and employees are well-informed, reducing resistance and confusion during reforms.	<i>"Communication must be constant and clear. Problems arise when leaders do not explain the plan properly."</i> (P8)
Readiness through capacity building	Leadership's role in preparing human resources-through training, mentoring, and clear direction-is crucial in equipping the institution for change.	<i>"Improve the workforce first, then infrastructure will follow. We must capacitate our people before expecting transformation."</i> (P5)

4.1. Proposed framework for institutional change management: the RAVER model

Table 6 and Figure 2 present the RAVER framework, a strategic model grounded in the lived experiences of faculty and administrators at RSU. Synthesizing the thematic findings from the study's four research objectives, it outlines the essential components for guiding effective institutional change. The framework offers a structured and context-sensitive approach to managing transitions in higher education settings, particularly in resource optimization, employee engagement, leadership, and academic innovation.

Table 6. Framework components

Component	Definition	Key actions	Intended outcome
R–Resource optimization and rationalization	Aligning human, financial, and physical resources to eliminate duplication and maximize efficiency.	Implement rationalization plans; pool expertise; optimize faculty and facility deployment.	Improved resource allocation and operational sustainability.
A–Adaptation and employee involvement	Encouraging staff participation in planning and implementation to build ownership of change.	Facilitate participatory planning; provide targeted training; establish feedback mechanisms.	Increased employee buy-in and reduced resistance.
V–Vision and communication	Ensuring reforms are strategically aligned and communicated with clarity.	Develop a shared vision; maintain consistent communication channels; address stakeholder concerns proactively.	Enhanced trust, shared goals, and coherent reform direction.
E–Enhancements in technology and academics	Upgrading technological infrastructure and academic offerings to meet current and future needs.	Invest in ICT tools; review and update curricula; integrate industry-relevant skills.	Modernized learning environment and improved student support services.
R–Role of leadership in change management	Demonstrating transformative, inclusive, and accountable leadership.	Promote internal talent; practice participative decision-making; recognize contributions; model ethical leadership.	Strengthened morale, institutional resilience, and reform sustainability.



Figure 2. The proposed RAVER framework

4.2. Applicability beyond RSU

The RAVER framework can serve as a transferable model for other universities by adapting its components to local contexts: i) in resource-rich institutions, the emphasis may shift toward innovation and expansion rather than rationalization; ii) in resource-constrained settings, the model's focus on optimization and participatory engagement can help maintain reform momentum despite limitations; iii) in multi-campus systems, context-sensitive communication strategies and differentiated implementation plans are crucial, aligning with Musaigwa [16] call for localized leadership approaches; and iv) in technologically advanced universities, the "enhancements" component can emphasize AI integration, data analytics, and digital learning ecosystems to further academic modernization.

4.3. Study limitations

This study presents valuable insights into how employees perceive institutional reforms and leadership influence in a state university, yet it is not without limitations. First, the use of qualitative interviews as the primary data collection method may introduce subjectivity in responses. As noted by Brinkmann and Kvale [28], qualitative interviewing, while powerful for uncovering lived experiences, can be influenced by interviewer presence, interpretation bias, and the social desirability of responses. Consequently, while the results offer depth, they may not fully represent the objective realities of all employees across various organizational layers.

Second, the study was conducted within a single university, with a relatively small number of participants selected through purposive sampling. Although this approach is consistent with qualitative methodologies that prioritize depth over breadth [20], it limits the transferability of findings to other institutions. Yousaf *et al.* [29] emphasize that organizational readiness for change is shaped by contextual factors such as institutional history, leadership style, and local resource constraints, which may not be comparable across universities. Moreover, the study did not incorporate perspectives from external stakeholders, such as students or policymakers, who also play crucial roles in institutional reforms.

Lastly, the study did not examine the long-term impact of change initiatives, nor did it account for external influences such as government mandates, funding policies, or political dynamics. As suggested by Essel *et al.* [27], these external factors can significantly shape the success or failure of institutional transformations, especially in developing and rural settings. Future studies may benefit from adopting mixed-methods approaches or longitudinal designs to measure the sustainability and broader institutional effects of leadership-driven change programs.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined how leadership and employee perspectives shape institutional readiness for change in a state university. It identified themes such as perceptions of change management, enabling and constraining factors, and the role of leadership communication, vision, and support. Readiness improves when leaders share a clear vision, provide adequate support, and communicate inclusively, but is hindered by limited infrastructure, resistance to change, and low stakeholder engagement.

The RAVER change management framework offers a practical and experience-based guide for institutional transformation. It highlights collaboration, capacity building, and inclusive leadership as essential for building a culture of ownership and resilience. From a policy perspective, the framework can guide reform planning, leadership development, and capacity-building initiatives, particularly in resource-constrained institutions. It can assist in prioritizing investments, optimizing staff deployment, and promoting participatory, transparent, and data-driven governance practices.

Future research should include longitudinal studies to examine the framework's long-term impact on institutional culture, leadership practices, and employee engagement. Mixed-methods approaches can provide deeper insights by combining quantitative measures of readiness and performance with qualitative narratives from stakeholders. Comparative studies across institutions and cultural contexts can refine the framework and expand its applicability in higher education. In conclusion, the RAVER framework provides an adaptable and evidence-based model for guiding sustainable change in higher education, with potential to support both RSU and other institutions navigating complex reforms.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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Roy F. Fiedacan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Philip R. Baldera	✓	✓				✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Emelyn R. Villanueva	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
Reynaldo P. Ramos		✓			✓		✓			✓		✓		✓
Emelia B. Ramos				✓	✓				✓					

C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All procedures followed in this study were conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships have influenced the findings or interpretations presented.

INFORMED CONSENT

All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. They were informed about the purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and confidentiality of their participation. Ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects were strictly followed. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Romblon State University Research Ethics Committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon [RFF], reasonable request. Access to qualitative transcripts is restricted to protect participant confidentiality.

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